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China-Vietnam: A Status Report

Four years after China's invasion of Vietnam--the first "lesson"--relations between the two countries remain cool. Negotiations, which were broken off in 1980, appear indefinitely postponed, and the two countries continue to issue sharp public recriminations over events in Kampuchea and along the China-Vietnam border. Chinese officials, moreover, continue to allude to the possibility of a second "lesson;" their most recent such threat was made in Bangkok last month. This paper reviews the relationship between the two countries, the military balance along their common border, and China's limited options should it decide to launch a second lesson.

While Beijing and Hanoi are at loggerheads over several issues--including conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea, Vietnamese territory occupied by China since the 1979 invasion, and Hanoi's expulsion of Chinese living in Vietnam--Hanoi's occupation of Kampuchea remains the most significant issue between the two countries. Hanoi believes the establishment of a client regime in Phnom Penh is necessary to its own security, and therefore "irreversible." In our opinion, Hanoi believes that a Kampuchea not under its control eventually must fall under Chinese influence. Furthermore, Kampuchea is the only major policy success since unification for the Vietnamese leadership, and they are unlikely to repudiate it.

China's ability to threaten Vietnam indirectly through Kampuchea is one of Beijing's few instruments of pressure on Hanoi. China provides nearly all the arms and supplies for the Communist Democratic Kampuchea resistance forces, and over the

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past year has provided small amounts of aid to the two major non-Communist resistance groups in an effort to maintain ASEAN's cooperation against Hanoi. In addition, Beijing has joined ASEAN in its campaign to deny legitimacy to the Vietnam-backed Heng Samrin regime and to encourage international pressure on Hanoi to withdraw. This campaign resulted in two votes heavily favoring continued seating for the resistance forces in last year's United Nations General Assembly. []

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The Military Balance

Beijing's pressure on two fronts--Kampuchea and northern Vietnam--and the memory of the 1979 invasion have pushed Vietnam to further militarize its society. Since 1979, Hanoi has increased the size of its army from 600,000 to 1 million troops and made massive reinforcements on its northern border. Vietnam now maintains a defense in depth along all major invasion routes from China, with rear area garrisons near Hanoi and combat units in forward areas manning tactical defensive positions to prevent significant loss of territory. New surface-to-air missile sites have been constructed near the border, supplies have been stockpiled in forward areas, and the chain of command has been streamlined. Also, the size of the air force has been doubled. []

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The bulk of the more than \$2 billion in Soviet military aid delivered since 1979 has been used to upgrade Vietnam's defense against China. The armor and artillery now in the Vietnamese inventory are superior to Chinese weapons. The Soviets have also supplied Fitter Su-22 attack aircraft, Hind attack and Hormone antisubmarine warfare helicopters, as well as Styx, Sepal, and Scud surface-to-surface missiles. Under Soviet guidance, Hanoi has staged large-scale, combined arms field exercises aimed at defending against an invading Chinese force to familiarize local and mainforce troops with coordinated defense tactics. []

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The Chinese have also improved their frontier defense posture. Since 1979 they have:

- Established at least five new regional divisions along the border.
- Formed two new MIG-21 regiments, improved forward combat airfields, and rotated bomber and fighter units to give their crews combat area experience.
- Conducted exercises in the border regions emphasizing the refinements of air force ground attack operations and high altitude interception.
- Improved road and rail networks leading to major invasion routes into Vietnam. []

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Despite China's efforts, the balance of military power has shifted dramatically in Vietnam's favor over the last 3 years. In 1979 the Chinese invasion force of 500,000 troops outnumbered the Vietnamese defenders by five to one. Today, China has only 270,000 troops (16 combat divisions) along the border, confronting at least 500,000 Vietnamese (43 ground force divisions, including 34 combat) in Hanoi's three northern military regions. We estimate that Vietnam's forces deployed in the three northern military regions have a three-to-one armor and an almost two-to-one artillery superiority over Chinese forces located along the Sino-Vietnamese border. [REDACTED]

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China's Limited Military Options

Neither China's military behavior nor its political behavior toward Vietnam suggest that Beijing intends to launch a major military operation against Vietnam over the next several months. We believe China will instead maintain tension along the border to tie down large numbers of Vietnamese troops that could otherwise be freed for duty in Kampuchea and to lend credibility to the threat of a second lesson. Beijing will also continue to back the resistance forces in Kampuchea. [REDACTED]

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If the Chinese believed large-scale military action were necessary, we believe they would opt for concentrated strikes against selected targets along narrow tactical fronts instead of launching a border-wide ground assault as they did in 1979. Destruction of economic targets, such as Vietnam's coal mines near the border or port facilities at Haiphong, would be plausible Chinese goals. An amphibious assault against Vietnam or against Vietnamese positions on disputed islands is less likely because of China's limited naval bombardment capability and the shortage of suitable beaches along the Vietnamese coast. China's South Sea Fleet, with the fewest combat ships and submarines of China's three fleets, has done little since 1979 to improve its seaborne assault capabilities, but it is capable of naval skirmishing around the disputed South China Sea island groups. [REDACTED]

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Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1979-82

Relations between Hanoi and Beijing deteriorated sharply in the late 1970s because of disputes over the level of Chinese aid, territorial conflicts, and Vietnam's poor treatment and subsequent expulsion of over 300,000 ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam. By mid-1978, China had cut off all aid to Vietnam. []

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The Chinese were encouraging the Pol Pot regime in Phnom Penh in its hostility toward Vietnam. In late 1978, Hanoi invaded Kampuchea to put an end to repeated harassing actions by Pol Pot's forces along Vietnam's western border. China retaliated in February 1979 by invading Vietnam. []

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Territorial disputes also figure prominently in the bitter relations between the two countries. The Chinese continue to hold small pieces of territory that they overran during the 1979 invasion, and thus have the upper hand in negotiations over border disputes. The Chinese suspended talks on the border question in March 1980, for example, arguing that Hanoi was using the talks to disseminate propaganda. Beijing since has rebuffed all Vietnamese overtures to reopen the talks as well as Hanoi's calls for holiday ceasefires. []

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In addition, the two sides have conflicting claims over two island groups in the South China Sea--the Paracels (held by China), and the Spratlys (held by Vietnam, the Philippines, and Taiwan). Control of these island groups would not only extend each country's territorial waters but also give it control over potentially rich offshore oil reserves. In September, Hanoi warned foreign oil companies not to sign contracts with Beijing for exploration in disputed waters. The warning came six weeks after 33 US and other Western oil firms submitted bids to China to explore large areas of the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea, including one area determined by seismic surveys to have excellent prospects. []

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Frequent, small-scale clashes along the Chinese-Vietnamese border add fuel to the propaganda war. In mid-October China accused Vietnam of committing 109 incidents over the previous six weeks, resulting in three Chinese killed and 11 wounded. The Vietnamese countered in January with a claim that in 1982 Chinese troops shelled or crossed into Vietnamese territory 401 times, killing or wounding "hundreds" of civilians, and that the Chinese had violated Vietnamese sea and air space 6,000 times each. []

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Chronology of Events

17 February 1979	Chinese invade Vietnam in response to Hanoi's invasion and occupation of Kampuchea. Chinese withdraw after six weeks.
18 April 1979	First session of Sino-Vietnamese normalization talks opens in Hanoi.
19 December 1979	After 15 sessions talks break off; the two sides agree to meet again in Beijing.
6 March 1980	China ends second round of talks; suggests they resume in Hanoi in late 1980.
8 March 1980	Vietnam proposes a third round of talks.
14 June 1980	China refuses to resume talks.
16 June 1980	Vietnam calls for the resumption of talks on 15 July.
23 June 1980	China refuses to resume talks.
25 June 1980	China warns Vietnam about unspecified "grave dangers" following Vietnamese incursion into Thailand two days earlier.
21 July 1980	China declares the Soviet-Vietnamese joint oil exploration agreement null and void.
22 December 1980	China again declines to resume talks with Vietnam, stating it will do so only when Vietnam takes action to create the necessary conditions.

2 January 1981	Vietnam proposes cease-fire during 3-9 February and returns 14 Chinese prisoners.
20 January 1981	China rejects the proposed cease-fire.
26 January 1981	Prisoner exchange.
16 February 1981	Vietnam states that China in the past two years is responsible for at least 4,000 provocations, resulting in over 34 "heights" seized and more than 200 civilians killed.
13 June 1981	Vietnam protests Chinese provocations; proposes a cease-fire and another round of talks.
18 July 1981	Vietnam condemns "arrogant and illegal" Chinese announcement establishing flight "danger zones" over territory that includes disputed Paracel and Spratly island groups.
31 August 1981	Vietnam urges China to resume talks.
7 September 1981	China, citing over 900 border incidents since May, refuses Vietnam's proposal.
28 December 1981	Vietnam proposes another cease-fire for the period 20-29 January.
4 January 1982	China rejects the proposal.
18 January 1982	Vietnam issues White Book on Paracels and Spratlys justifying Vietnamese sovereignty and rejecting any Chinese claims.
30 January 1982	Vietnam proposes that talks resume within the next six months.

16 February 1982

Vietnam proposes the
resumption of talks.

18 February 1982

China rejects the proposal.

21 June 1982

Prisoner exchange.

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27 July 1982

Vietnamese call in Chinese
Ambassador for substantive
discussions--the first time
since his arrival in December
1980--and tell him that
Vietnam wishes to improve
relations "within the
framework of present
difficulties."

14 August 1982

Vietnam proposes a cease-fire
from 27 August to 8 October.

26 August 1982

China rejects the proposal.

25 September 1982

Vietnam warns China and
foreign companies doing
business with China against
drilling for oil in the Gulf
of Tonkin.

17 January 1983

Vietnam proposes ceasefire
from 5 to 19 February to
observe Tet holiday.

25 January 1983

China refuses ceasefire
proposal.

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